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Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma

MANDY SADAN

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 470p.

Over the past 15 years, Mandy Sadan has single-handedly launched new historical scholarship on the Kachin people. The Kachin, a group of highlanders who mostly reside in the northern region of Myanmar, had long been widely known among academics, thanks to Edmund Leach's 1954 classic *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. The lack of access to Myanmar, however, has meant that until very recently scholarly discussions were often more about Leach and his theory than about the Kachin people themselves. Sadan, an English historian, has introduced an entirely new set of historical studies from a resolutely empirical perspective. The much-anticipated monograph, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, brings together the fruits of her scholarship, including a surprisingly large amount of findings that have not been published before. This publication is certainly a cause for celebration, especially because it is rare that such a thick monograph exclusively focused on one ethnic minority group is published at all nowadays.¹⁾ With this monograph, Sadan has again raised the standard of Kachin scholarship to a new level. Students of Kachin studies will be indebted to this book for decades to come.

Being and Becoming Kachin is not an accessible book, however. Sadan herself admits in her Introduction that "the primary concern of this book is to explore the historical, ongoing, lived complexities" (p. 20) and as such her determination to do justice to the "complexities" of the subject has made the book exceptionally long.²⁾ She uses the word "complex" often—too often, in my opinion—to characterize the subject matter in order to justify the length of this 512-page tome. It is not available as an e-book, and the price of this book is unforgiving. As a result, it is unlikely to be widely available, especially in Southeast Asia. Aware of these concerns, Sadan has created a very impressive accompanying website (www.mandysadan.weebly.com), which presents not only chapter-by-chapter summaries but also extremely rare archival materials in digital formats. The website is a truly commendable effort, which should inspire many other scholars.

In this review, I will not perform the conventional task of offering chapter-by-chapter summaries, mainly because we can easily find excellent summaries on the Internet.³⁾ Rather, I will

1) An obvious exception is Anthony Walker's immense study, *Merit and Millennium*, a 900-page study of the Lahu in Thailand and China.

2) In a post-publication forum in *Sojourn*, Sadan has stressed again that *Being and Becoming Kachin* is "ultimately attempting to achieve . . . a recognition of the depth and complexity of the [Kachin] history" (Farrelly *et al.* 2014, 479).

3) Magnus Fiskesjö (2014) has also written an excellent summary for each chapter in his engaging review, which is available online. Sadan herself offers a summary on the accompanying website: www.mandysadan.weebly.com/book-summary.html, accessed January 15, 2015.

treat this monumental book as the culmination of Sadan's distinguished scholarship and raise a few broad questions about her method. I will therefore refer not only to *Being and Becoming Kachin* but also to some of Sadan's earlier studies. I will first highlight what I consider to be the book's most original and promising contributions, and then move on to address methodological and historiographical issues. Calling into question her strong faith in secular historiography and textual positivism, I will argue that the historical narratives that are produced and consumed among the Kachin people themselves deserve more scholar attention. My contention is that the Kachin self-representations, which are replete with Christian evangelical rhetoric today, are a worthy object of sustained inquiry.

One of the most important contributions of *Being and Becoming Kachin* is the spatial scope with which Sadan reframes the geography of "Kachin." Her study broadens the geographical scope of "Kachin" by consistently including the adjacent areas of Jinghpaw-speaking communities: "Singpho" area of northeast India and the "Jingpo" area of southwest China.⁴⁾ Refusing to treat the Kachin space as a periphery of a nation-state, she treats this region as one integral area. This geographical perspective was always latent in her scholarship, but in this book it is explicitly articulated and substantiated throughout the book. While ethnicity was the primary focus in her previous studies, she emphasizes this geographical framing in this monograph. Although I am not convinced that the terminology of "borderworld" serves her purpose well, it is a refreshing approach, which distinguishes *Being and Becoming Kachin* from almost all other studies that bear the word "Kachin," including Sadan's earlier work.⁵⁾

Being and Becoming Kachin particularly shines where it uncovers little-known historical events in northeast India, starting from the encounter between the Singpho and the British East India Company in 1824. Sadan skillfully relates these events to the greater "Kachin" geography. On the China side too, she identifies a number of relevant events in Yunnan (and beyond) and brings to light historical linkages across the border. One such event is the so-called Panthay Rebellion, whose impacts on the Myanmar side have hardly been explored before (pp. 143–146).⁶⁾

While Sadan explores both the Indian and Chinese sides, the strength of the book is the former. Her meticulous reading of British archival documents is unparalleled and breathtaking. As Fiskesjö (2014) has pointed out in his review, however, the voluminous Chinese-language sources are not covered as comprehensively. It would be unfair, however, to expect Sadan to cover the Chinese-language literature on top of everything else she has already unearthed and presented. It suffices

4) The Jinghpaw (Jingpho) language is the lingua franca among the Kachin people. Jinghpaw is spelled in various ways—"Singpho" in India and usually "Jingpo" in China.

5) The only exception I am aware of is the work by Nicholas Farrelly, whose unpublished 2010 dissertation examines the "Kachin" in the three countries. Farrelly has written a review of *Being and Becoming Kachin* (Farrelly et al. 2014).

6) A rare exception here is the work by Andrew Forbes. See Forbes (1986; 1988). It should be mentioned that the Panthay Rebellion is usually called the Du Wenxiu Rebellion in China.

to say that thanks to her pioneering work, we are now able to identify more clearly than ever the gaps to be filled by other scholars.⁷⁾ *Being and Becoming Kachin* brings to light a vast amount of archival sources in more than 1,500 footnotes. (It is hoped that the book will be eventually made available on a searchable, digital format.)⁸⁾

In Sadan's view, upland Southeast Asia has been poorly served by academics, who fail to back up their arguments with verifiable empirical references. She names in particular three studies: *Political Systems of Highland Burma* by Edmund Leach, *System, Structure, and Contradiction* by Jonathan Friedman, and *The Art of Not Being Governed* by James C. Scott, arguing that these works, although thought-provoking, are not sufficiently grounded in historical evidence. In the section titled "Kachin history and the problem of anthropology," Sadan argues that for these scholars "the concern was to develop totaling, ahistorical . . . interpretations" (p. 15).⁹⁾ She demands that a scholar provide the reader with references so that the study can "be tested and critiqued properly" (Sadan in Farrelly *et al.* 2014, 479).

Modern academic scholarship is, in George Stocking's words, "not search but re-search."¹⁰⁾ *Being and Becoming Kachin* exemplifies this "re-search" principle of modern academic scholarship. Sadan's insistence on this "re-search" principle, however, raises certain methodological and historiographical questions. To put it simply, is this an adequate mode of inquiry if we want to understand how the Kachin themselves view their history? How should we seek to understand and engage with the historical accounts produced and consumed by the Kachin people themselves, which do not follow the academic conventions? How should we analyze their religious and mythical narratives, which do not adhere to the standard scholarly practice? In fact, Sadan does not address these questions herself. She has been dismissive towards the historical narratives that circulate among the Kachin themselves.

Sadan has repeatedly expressed dismay that Kachin self-representations are dominated by Christian evangelism and that they are reductive, essentializing, and dogmatic as a result. In her 2007 paper, "Constructing and Contesting the Category 'Kachin' in the Colonial and Post-colonial Burmese State," she wrote: "it has been very hard to challenge, refute, renegotiate or decolonize the constructions of traditional Kachin morality and society that are perpetuated by the Kachin institutional churches," calling for a secular history of Kachin resistance against Christianity (2007,

7) There have been excellent studies on Jinghpo and Zaiwa in Yunnan, most notably by Wang Zhusheng (1997) and Ho Tsui-Ping (1997), but to date no-one has conducted a substantive historical and ethnographic research on the cross-border dynamics.

8) Sadan herself seems to defend the paper format when she says that the "materiality of the book is significant" (Sadan in Farrelly *et al.* 2014, 477). But by "materiality" she actually means the *length* of the book.

9) Sadan has reiterated this point in the post-publication forum by saying that her book was "definitely a reaction to this kind of Kachin imaginary"—the kind of imaginary entertained by scholars like Leach and Scott (Sadan in Farrelly *et al.* 2014, 479).

10) Quoted in Appadurai (2000, 11).

52–53). In *Being and Becoming Kachin* too, she observes that the influential Christian evangelism has made “the secular appraisal of the Kachin past . . . difficult” (p. 403). From her point of view, the problem is that “the Kachin people lack an adequately researched secular history” (2007, 65–66), and that “Kachin elites . . . lack the secular academic training in historical and anthropological disciplines that would enable them to translate . . . into more globally understood conventions” (2010, 147). Her insistent demand reminds me of the observation made by Webb Keane in his paper “Secularism as a Moral Narrative of Modernity”: “secularity often presents in compulsory terms, even as an ethical demand” (Keane 2013, 159). It appears that Sadan is disturbed by the “morally and politically troubling anachronisms, premoderns or anti-moderns” of the Kachin (*ibid.*, 162).¹¹ I wish Sadan had reflected more on her own reactions and spared more thoughts as to why secular historiography has to be so privileged.

In *Being and Becoming Kachin*, Sadan engages with the issue of Kachin Christianity at length for the first time, devoting a whole chapter titled “Virtue” to it. The primary concern of this chapter is to dismantle the popular teleological narrative enjoyed by Kachin Christians. According to this narrative, the Kachin embraced Christianity during the colonial era and the religious conversion unavoidably led to a war against the oppressive state. Sadan analyzes archival data to show that the Kachin conversion actually took place not before but during the insurgency. This is certainly an important and necessary corrective. Sadan’s refutation of the evangelical account, however, leaves what seems to me a larger question untouched: why does the evangelical narrative appeal so strongly to the Kachin, despite the factual inaccuracies that could be pointed out rather easily? Is it conceivable that the evangelical narrative spreads *because* it is able to gloss historical facts as a simple, reductionist, essentializing story? Sadan herself admits that “Christianity is a useful resource for unifying discourses of historical experience among a diverse set of communities,” but this particular kind of discursive resourcefulness needs to be analyzed more specifically (p. 463).

In pursuing these questions about a variety of narratives, I find it helpful to consult *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* by Liisa Malkki.¹² When Malkki arrived at a refugee camp in Tanzania, she found that the refugees were constantly telling historical stories among themselves: “Unexpectedly, [the camp] turned out to be a site that was enabling and nurturing an elaborate and self-conscious historicity among its refugee inhabitants” (Malkki 1995, 52–53). She found out that the historical narratives told by the refugees “went beyond merely recording events. It represented not only a description of the past, nor even merely an evaluation of the past, but a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamental moral terms. In this sense, it cannot be accurately described as either

11) For a penetrating analysis of this moral disturbance, see Talal Asad’s essay on the British reaction to the Rushdie Affair (Asad 1990).

12) Another useful study here is Susan Harding’s study of the rhetoric of Christian conversion. See Harding (1987; 2000).

history or myth. It was what can be called a *mythico-history*.” Malkki’s insights remind us that people everywhere create quasi-historical narratives but that they are typically mythical and religious. These mythical narratives need to be taken seriously because they often reveal how a community shares situated knowledge and moral visions. Following Malkki, it is worth asking what kind of mythico-histories are being created by the Kachin. I realize that the questions I am raising here are more anthropological than historical. But studying a people like the Kachin makes us understand that the two are inseparably intertwined.¹³⁾ A methodological implication of this inseparability between history and anthropology is that ethnographic evidence might come to play a central role in writing a Kachin history and investigating the Kachin historiography.

It should be noted that Sadan too presents ethnographic descriptions and relies on unrecorded conversations in *Being and Becoming Kachin*. In the chapter on Christianity, for example, she assesses the impacts of the missionaries on the Kachin view of history and offers the following in a footnote: “These comments are based on extended conversations . . . in a variety of settings, especially during the period 1996–9” (p. 365). These “extended conversations” surely fail to meet the “re-search” principle, as they are impossible to trace and verify. This is obviously a common issue for those of us who try to learn from speaking with ordinary people during long fieldwork. Studying a people like the Kachin thus challenges our own conventions.

In *Being and Becoming Kachin*, Sadan convincingly repudiates the erroneous view (espoused by scholars like Robert Taylor) that the upland peoples like Kachin were “essentially deluded supporters of [the British] oppressive order” and “politically unsophisticated” (p. 260). When it comes to the Kachin’s religious behavior, however, she appears to uphold a similarly unfounded view, implying that the Kachin are ultimately deluded supporters of an oppressive order and that they are not sufficiently sophisticated to “decolonize” themselves. For all the groundbreaking work Sadan has done, she appears to too hastily dismiss the Kachin subjectivity when it comes to their encounter with Christianity. To suggest, even implicitly, that “the Kachin have been misled by colonial officials and foreign missions” (2007, 53) and that they remain unaware of this deceit today is quite antithetical to her scholarship, which has been skillfully uncovering the Kachin-centric perspectives.

Perhaps it is worth recalling that these questions of subjectivity have been raised among historians of Southeast Asia too. Many years ago, David Wyatt urged us to think about “what was happening inside people’s heads” (Wyatt 1997, 689). Commenting on Victor Lieberman’s “externalist approach,” Wyatt wrote that it is “necessary and useful,” but he also suggested that historians also investigate “internal” change—how people’s views and perspectives changed over time.”

13) As James Scott has noted: “no historian ought to be allowed to walk out the door in the morning without being strapped to an anthropologist who can recover the rich texture of human action and understanding” (2013, 341). For a set of insights into the relationship between history and anthropology, see Tagliocozzo and Willford (2009).

Such a goal would require us to engage with the historical accounts that are appreciated by the studied people themselves. We would like to know better how the Kachin people talk about their history among themselves as they endeavor to make sense of their present predicament and to envision their collective future. In order for us to write a Kachin history, it seems necessary that we seek to understand the “method” of the Kachin historical narratives, however erroneous they are from the empirical positivist perspective.

Rather than framing Christianity with the binary of domination and resistance, it might be more useful to investigate the Christianization as a historical and ongoing process with many unexpected twists and turns. Such an approach would make us more cautious towards the view that Christianization is a one-way street of colonial domination. In her studies of South Africa, Jean Comaroff has stressed how “Christianity was inseparable from the whole logic of the way colonialism had been made *and was then being unmade*” (quoted in D. K. Kim 2010, italics added). An example of this unmaking can be found in the formation of the African National Congress in South Africa; the founders came out of the African Independent Churches, “whose leader had taken the Bible—which had entered the community as a colonizing, civilizing text—and read another message out of it.” For our purpose here, it is worth recalling that the founders of the Kachin Independence Army were Baptists. Comaroff also urges us to observe how Christianity itself changes as it travels, asking: “Is Africa becoming Christianized or was Christianity becoming Africanized?” (*ibid.*). A similar question can be raised for the Kachin context: while the Kachin are Christianized, isn’t Christianity also Kachin-ized at the same time?

If we take the Christianization as a historical process in which the evangelical rhetoric has been slowly yet steadily adopted and modified among the Kachin, then many new historical questions emerge. What aspects of the evangelical rhetoric did the Kachin first come to adopt? Has the evangelical rhetoric been uniformly shared among various ethno-linguistic groups and across various denominations within the “Kachin?” How do the non-Christian Kachin in China and India view the ethno-nationalist narrative? How does the Kachin military use the evangelical ethno-nationalist narratives without alienating its non-Christian members? How do Kachin evangelical Christians solve contradictory narratives?

I have taken this opportunity to write much more than a conventional book review and raise a number of questions here, because Kachin studies is entering a new phase, thanks to Sadan’s path-breaking work. Asking these questions was unthinkable 15 years ago. For those of us who follow the paths she has opened up, it is necessary to engage even more deeply than ever with methodological questions. It is Sadan herself who identifies method as “the greatest problem” in *Being and Becoming Kachin* (p. 26).

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Dreaming of Money in Ho Chi Minh City

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Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013, xii + 193p.

The scholarly study of banknotes (notaphily) is not a new phenomenon. But it did not take systematic modern form until the 1920s. (Ironically, it emerged under the Weimar Republic just as Germany was entering a three-year period of hyperinflation.) Since then, the number of numismatic associations has grown considerably, as have specialized publications. *Banknote News* is one relevant example. *Banknote News* issues breaking stories about international paper and polymer money. Collectors are the primary audience, and the website contains hundreds of links to vendors for people who wish to purchase the bank notes they covet. One of the links directs collectors to the 2014 edition of *The Banknote Book*. It includes 205 stand-alone chapters, each of which can be purchased separately as a country-specific catalog. (The Vietnam chapter provides detailed information on notes the State Bank of Vietnam issued, but only from 1964 to present, color copies of them, as well as their current market valuations.) The four-volume set currently runs 2,554 pages and details more than 21,000 types and varieties of currency, some dating back centuries.

The global community of currency collectors and the desires that shape their relationships to different forms of money provides a useful entry point into Allison Truitt's fascinating book, *Dreaming of Money in Ho Chi Minh City*. Truitt is similarly interested in state-issued currencies, especially with regard to how people conceptualize the interplay of their material and symbolic properties. But her interests do not end there. The ethnographic focus of the book is instead upon interpersonal relations, as mediated by different currencies (primarily coins, paper, and gold), which she dubs "monetary pluralism" (pp. 149–150).

The author's attention to interpersonal relations enables her to raise new questions about the cultural politics of identity in Vietnam's economic capital, Ho Chi Minh City, which she rightfully acknowledges is not always representative of the country as a whole. Nevertheless, the central questions around which the book is organized are not specific to it. The questions are applicable everywhere, and I reproduce them here for this reason. First, she asks, "Can people exert control over state-sponsored infrastructures such as territorial currencies?" Second, "How do we come to have faith in the currency we handle?" Third, "How do people personalize money so that it becomes a vehicle for expressing qualities other than exchange value?" And, finally, "What hap-